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ABSTRACT

This study examined the attitudes of 140 children ages 2 through 7 toward mixed-age grouping in a Slovenian kindergarten (preschool) setting. On four consecutive Friday mornings the children, normally grouped in classes aged 2-3 years, 3-4 years, 4-5 years, and 5-7 years, were given the opportunity to switch classes and play among children of differing ages. It was found that children aged 4-5 passed from one group to another more than any other age group. It was concluded that occasional togetherness on the playground and in play activities was sufficient for most of the children to satisfy their need for companionship with children of other ages. (MDM)

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FLEXIBLE ORGANISATION OF EDUCATIONAL WORK IN KINDERGARTEN

56% of the Slovene pre-school children population spends the larger part of the day (8 to 10 hours) in kindergarten, in an emotionally favourable climate, where it is necessary to organize life and educational work in such a way, so as to enable children to develop all the potentials they possess as individuals. A kindergarten is a special institution in the fact that it organizes community life of small children. It does not model itself either on school, where children have different physical and mental characteristics, nor on family, from which it differs in the number of children it takes care of. The kindergarten is above all in service of the child and only second in service of the family and school. It cannot serve as a substitute for the family. Its basic value, as defined by Kamenov, is to enable a child active cooperation within a peer community, active cooperation under conditions conforming to him, his abilities, interests and developmental needs (1. p.133). It constantly tends to improve conditions essential for child development and learning.

Organizing life and work of children in a kindergarten depends upon the goals and the programme of pre-school education typical of a certain environment.

Concern for an individual in a socially organized pre-chool education influences a child's development. Through specific educational programs kindergartens around the world follow more or less structured educational programmes.

Distinctively structured programmes foresee situations in smallest detail, all the activities taking place in a kindergarten are defined, the principle of systematic work is observed. The reasons for such an approach, which most often explain the scholarization of pre-school education, are:

- acquisition of work habits necessary for success in school
- basic literacy
- prevention of stress upon entering school

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- knowledge of numbers and elements of arithmetic, etc.

In the developed world there exists also the other extreme, where in a kindergarten no activities are planned in advance, where there are neither schedules nor imperatives for a child to learn something systematically. Among the reasons for an unstructured approach the most relevant ones are the following:

- development of the individuality

- spontaneous learning through play without constraint

- possibility of applying various approaches (for example: the Waldorf kindergarten).

A highly structured programme (in the social as well as educational sense) follows the principle "equal knowledge for all children presented in an equal manner", while an unstructured programme tends to adapt as much as possible to the various child interests and abilities, to a spontaneity in play (2, p.23).

Another aspect defining the contents, forms, methods and resources of kindergarten work is the orientation of the programme regarding the area of development. Here we distinguish among:

- programmes which emphasize the development of intellectual functions

- programmes which are carried out within areas of individual scientific disciplines

- programmes which are directed towards the development of social competence.

The programmes which emphasize the development of child's intellectual functions were especially popular at the end of the sixties, as they were influenced by the psychological and sociological studies about the developmental possibilites of children in the pre-school period. They were supposed to develop more intensely the child's cognitive area. In order to prepare him better for school special attention was put on the didactic material which developed the capacities of observation, thinking and speech. When using a program of exercises for developing these functions, certain general educational principles were disregarded, namely developing independence, self-confidence, socialization.

The educational approach demands that educational work develop according to areas corresponding to certain scientific disciplines, where of course the child's developmental stage is taken into account. This orientation was greatly influenced by Bruner's thesis that certain scientific contents can be given to children at each stage of child's development and that every curriculum should be based on scientific concepts and knowledge. This approach like the former one led to scholarization, where the intellectual aspect was too greatly emphasized.

The third approach faces critically the deductively set educational goals of mental functions and educational contents, where the child and his needs are not being considered. Contrary to the two former approaches, which emphasize cognitive development in pre-school period, the socio-situational approach emphasizes the importance of the development of social competence. Here social learning is in the foreground. In this process a child develops the ability and the willingness for responsible and independent decision-making and for realizing his own interests, while at the same time taking into account interests of others. At the basis of this approach is namely the need of society for autonomous individualities, capable of using their abilities to adjust their own interests to the interests of others and to the interests of the society in general (3). Of course social learning does not exclude the acquisition of knowledge and abilities, since these are necessary for autonomous action. Here the relationships and interactions among the participants of the educational process: children, educators and parents, are of utmost importance. We are acquainted with the model "Social Learning", developed by a work team in Munich under the leadership of J. Zimmer (4).

The child is from his birth onwards a social being and his feelings and cognitions depend greatly on the relationships and contacts with other people. The family environment, especially because a modern family is very small (3 - 4 members), becomes for the child after he has reached three years of age a too narrow frame, since at this age the developmental need of the child to become involved in wider social structures starts expressing itself very distinctly. The family cannot satisfy in full the child's need for peer companioship, it cannot enable him to expand social contacts to include adults and other children, neither does it enable him to experience the social institution which sets equal demands on all. A kindergarten definitely has certain advantages and more possibilities to satisfy this child's need. Here a child can enrich his social experience and widen his contacts within the social and natural environment, develop

social abilities and adjust his interests to the interests of other people. In community life he becomes acquainted with the rules that a child has to follow to successfully join a community of other people.

In order to benefit the child, various functions are carried out by the kindergarten. These are: the caring function, the satisfaction of biological needs, health care, the compensational function, the corrective and preventive functions, preparation for school, the socializing function. Especially the last function has recently been discovered to be the basic reason for a socially organized pre-school education. In all other areas the kindergarten is only a help and a supplement to the family.

In the last decade we have decided in Slovenia to follow more intensely the third aproach of pre-school child education. The results of the first two kinds of approaches are still present. In the majority of kindergartens the division into groups follows chronological age, which enables successful and easy development within the cognitive area. We have proceeded from the hypothesis that equal age means very similar abilities and characteristics of children. Thus we form groups of children from 12 - 24 months, 2 - 3 years, 3 - 4 years, 4 - 5 years and 5 -6 (7) years of age. Such a homogeneous age group of children stays together all day, its children mixing with other children only occasionally (on the playground, on other different occasions, in the dressing room, etc.). Only in smaller kindergartens, having two or three groups only, are the groups composed of children of different ages (mixed groups). In some areas they have recently deliberately decided to form groups with children of different ages.

Contrary to the prejudices about asocial characteristics of small children, the attitude has been accepted that pre-school children are socio-centric and capable of forming social relationships, with peer interaction proving to be very useful for them (5). C.W. Gordon states that in pre-school age child's relationships are limited to peers and that only after six years of age a child seeks a friend outside his peer group or class (6). Peer contacts are certainly very important, but mixing children of different ages also contributes to their socio-emotional and general development, as well as to the development of participation among them. Children themselves express the wish to associate with children of different ages. The kindergarten teachers have noticed that some children feel much better in a group of children either older or younger than themselves. Sometimes children in an equal age group have also expressed a wish to join for a short

period of time a friend or brother/sister in another group.

Re-orientation of kindergarten work in the sense of taking into consideration children's interests, needs and wishes to a greater extent, also means a greater demand for flexibility of educational work in the kindergarten. Flexibility can cover more than one area: day schedule, age of a group, place, contents, methods, forms and resources of educational work. This means adjusting the organization of life and work in the kindergarten to the individual needs of the children. One of the major tasks of a kindergarten teacher is to organize such educational situations, where the child can be active in different areas, namely those, where his interests lie and where new things are opening up for him, things that might attract his attention and where he is willing to participate. The educational approach which should include all the elements of personality structure (temperament, character), motives, values, abilities and physical characteristics requires a flexible kindergarten teacher. Only in this way can a child develop successfully.

Within an educational process of greater elasticity in organizing life and educational work, a child is heeded more, which does not mean that we have become lenient or that we are spoiling him. Our wish is only that the child's independence in decision-making and in activity comes into the foreground, that he experiences success and satisfaction, becomes motivated for various activities, persists in contents and resources suitable for him, that there exists a variety of contacts with other children and adults in the kindergarten, that he experiences different places in the kindergarten, etc..

PROBLEM

Not until very long ago our system of pre-school education was similar to the school system in many ways. The most important part of the program was orienting children towards carrying out certain tasks, although this covered the lesser part of the child's stay in kindergarten. The educational areas were divided according to the model of the division of school subjects, with the common and frontal form of educational work predominating. This of course also influenced the formation of groups. All the above characteristics can be realized only in homogeneos age groups.

Although children in kindergarten are as a rule divided into homogeneous age groups, the researchers agree that interpersonal communication of children of different ages is more natural. Brandbarda and Watkins (8) state that in spontaneous play children do not form peer groups only. They mention in their article the research where it has been establised that within the neighbourhood children spend more than half of their time in play with children at least one year older or younger than themselves.

Studies about the influence of a homogeneous age group on child's development have shown that it is better for a child to keep company with children of different ages. Based on results and research Fein and Clarke-Steward have established that in homogeneous age groups there exists less physical and verbal aggression, there are less conflicts and more social contacts. The atmosphere is more emotional and less competitive (9). The company of younger children helps the children with social (isolated and less adaptable) and emotional difficulties to learn and master various social skills faster.

In one of the kindergartens in the surroundings of Ljubljana a study has been made, where we have decided to introduce greater flexibility in the organization of educational work in homogeneous age groups. We followed and assessed the children's need or wish to pass from one group to another and thus enlarge the selection of contents, playmates, place and resources according to their interests and wishes.

The kindergarten where homogeneous age groups lived quite isolated in their playrooms opened all the playroom doors and enabled the children to join according to their wishes other children of different age, other rooms, other activities and play.

We have tried to find answers to the following questions:

1. If given the opportunity, how many children will decide to pass over to another group?

2. Which activity or area seems to be more interesting to move to?

3. How long does the interest for a daily passing over from one group to another last?

4. Does the interest for transition depend on the child's age?

The transition or passing from one group to another has to be defined. A child passes to another group when he independently decides to join an activity in another playroom, stays there and then returns without disturbing other children.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Action research was carried out in two phases:

1. First children were given the opportunity to pass between two groups, in which 52 children, 5 to 7 years old, were included. If they wished, the children could join in the activities of the other group at a specific time. Two kindergarten teachers drew a a weekly plan and set the activities, where a transition from one group to another was made possible. They chose the activities from the following areas: speech education, art education, music, dance and environmental education. Both groups worked in the same area simultaneously. The possibility of transition was offered for five weeks.

Each transition was noted on an observation sheet:

Name of the child	Activity area				
	Speech	Art	Music	Dance	Environment
. . . . .					
TOTAL					

The observation took place in the spring of 1990.

2. The transitions were not possible every day. The children were allowed to do so only on Fridays, four weeks in a row. These play mornings were carefully planned by the kindergarten teachers. On Thursdays, before the end of the work day, they met and planned the program for the following day. Usually the kindergarten teacher was responsible for preparing the activity from the area, which suited her most and where she was professionally the strongest.
Each kindergarten teacher received an observation sheet with the list of the children of all six groups and all the possible activities from different areas. They carried out four observations.

RESULTS

1. Transition of children between two groups

At the beginning the children were enthusiastic about the novelty in the organization of kindergarten life and on the first day, after the groups had discussed the theme of friendship, all children used the opportunity of visiting another playroom (100%).

On the next day the children had the opportunity to pass over to another group during an art activity. They were painting their friends and during the time of the activity no child decided to go to another group. But at the end of the activity both groups looked at the exhibition of paintings of both groups.

On the third day the interest for transition arose again. It was the area of music education which stimulated it. 60% of the children decided to pass over to another group.

On the fourth day the children were offered the opportunity to join in the dancing activity on the playground and 27% of the children used it.

On the fifth day the children were tidying the playground and had the opportunity of using different tools. The activity required arrangements between children, mutual help and lending of tools. Transition was noticed with 79% of the children.

In the following week the children used the opportunity of transition on the average of 10%. In next three weeks the children were not interested in transition any more. There was probably more than one reason for such a situation. Children decided about the transition by themselves. They felt well in the group they had joined, they were gay and relaxed. They persisted in the activity to the end. It seems that after having satisfied their curiosity they decided to return to their home group, which they knew well.
We established that the opportunity for transition was offered too frequently, so following the first week, the offer began losing its magic with each day. Therefore we decided for an opportunity of transition once a week, this time including all the groups in the kindergarten, so as to have a more varied and richer offer.

Table 1: Number of transitions according to the kind of activity
Histogram 1: Extent of transition according to the kind of activity (in 5).

2. Transition of children among six groups

Every Friday morning in the sequence of four weeks, the kindergarten teachers opened the doors of the playrooms in the kindergarten and invited the children to decide independently where they wanted to play.

It is interesting to note that in the first week this offer for change was not used by any of the 140 children. In the second week younger children started to show interest, while older children did not use the opportunity. In the third week the greatest number of children joined other groups, while in the fourth week the interest for transition diminished greatly.

Table 2: Extent of transition among six groups (in %)
Histogram 2: Average number of transitions in individual groups on four Fridays.

The Influence of Age on Transition

We established the wish for transition in all groups, but the number of transitions varied.

2 - 3 year old children passed from one group to another to a lesser extent because at this age they are only starting to develop their need for peer play. In this period individual play predominates, with some parallel play already present. Since many children in the group were newcomers, the kindergarten meant for them unknown ground. In such cases they have to be given a feeling of security and welcome. This can be achieved by the kindergarten teacher, whom the child knows and who is constantly with him. Therefore he does not want to leave her and go somewhere else.

3 - 4 year old children passed from one group to another to a greater extent, because they are in a period, where interest for peer play is increasing. A child likes playing in small groups, which are quickly and constantly changing. He also plays for a shorter span of time.

4 - 5 year old children passed from one group to another the most. They already know the kindergarten well and they also know all the persons involved in kindergarten work. They feel independent, play in small groups, have many ideas, which are rather difficult for them to realize on their own, so they seek play with older children and adults, and with their cooperation and help they can succeed.

5 - 7 year old children. At this age real friendships are formed among children. For play a child will choose a playmate of the same age. Now children cooperate well. If a group has lived together for many years (from the time of entering kindergarten), a child community has been established. This can serve as an explanation why the transition of 5 - 7 year old children was less frequent. Involvement of other younger children into a formed community is also rather difficult, because such a child has to be able to control his emotions (at least to some degree) and has to be able to consider the wishes and needs of others. He has to reach a certain level of mental and social maturity to partake in play with older children as an equal partner.

The Influence of the Content of Educational Work on the Transition of Children

At the time of transitions different activities were taking place in groups, such as: "launderette - wash house", "at the doctor's", drawing nook, shaping natural materials, puppet play, dance school, cooking nook, painting, story hour, physical exercise hour, carpenter's hour, sewing hour, "at the hairdresser's".

Observing the transitions made us aware of a close link between the contents of the offered activities and the transitions themselves. Some facts supporting this finding are:

- 2 - 3 year old children enjoy in contact with water and in play with water. Therefore the play "launderette - wash house" in their home playroom was just the thing for them. In such an interesting activity and pleasant atmosphere they were simply not interested in children and activities of other groups. This also happened with other content, for example drawing.

- 3 - 4 year old children had the opportunity of shaping natural materials, where they had to use glue. Since at this age they are still rather unskilled, they needed the help of adults. They did not like the fact that they frequently had to wait for help. Therefore 36% of them decided to go to other places. In the puppet nook everybody could take part, so there were less decisions for transition (10% of the children). When "dance school" was organized in their home group, only 5% went elsewhere.

- 4 - 5 year old children were among other activities offered the opportunity for painting. Although they enjoy expressing themselves through painting, this activity is rather "static" for them, so 28% of them joined older children in the physical exercise hour. When they had a cooking nook in their home playroom, which did not happen often, the atmosphere was pleasant and interesting and the transition correspondingly small (5% of the children). The same number of transitions was observed when the children listened to fairy tales, which are at this age very popular.

- 5 - 6 year old children were extremely attracted by the carpenter's nook, boys as well as girls. 10% of the children nevertheless decided on the transition, but only because they had not received the necessary resources or tools for what they had

wanted to produce.

- 6 - 7 year old children, 25% of them, used the opportunity for transition during puppet activity in their home playroom, because this activity was offered to them quite frequently. The sewing workshop with tailoring and sewing did not attract many children at first. They went to look into other playrooms but soon returned, so that finally only 15% of the children were absent. Still less children (10%) decided to join other groups when they had the activity "at the hairdresser's" in their own playroom. The reason was that real hairdryers and other equipment were available, which was for children interesting enough to stay in their playroom.

In the experiment of a single offer in all groups (play with cloth), where the need of associating with children from other groups could actually be revealed, it was established that children were not interested in transition. Frequently such comments were heard from children who went to look in other playrooms and then quickly returned: "Ah, it's all the same. There's only cloth everywhere." In conversations with children it became evident that they decided to join another group because of the activity which would satisfy their needs and momentary wishes more than the activity in their home playroom.

A child does not have any wish for transition if in his environment there is an activity interesting enough for him or if elsewhere nothing is different from his own playroom.

CONCLUSION

Endeavours to organize an educational environment for children, where they had the opportunity to choose company, place and activities according to their wishes, have changed the everyday life of the kindergarten, where most of the life proceeded in homogeneous age groups. We expanded the opportunities of work and movement for the children. This offer or opportunity was accepted by less children than expected. Nevertheless there are some children in every kindergarten who would find the activites most suitable to their needs somewhere else and not within their own group. For although a kindergarten teacher knows his children, their characteristics and their peculiarities, and wants to satisfy their individual needs, wishes and interests to the utmost, she tends towards the average and can never satisfy all children equally. The flexibility of the kindergarten teacher when organizing life and work in a kindergarten can essentially contribute to the climate and situations, so as to enable the child to be as active as possible. And if he is active, he will develop successfully. Since during the study the activities in the kindergarten proceeded in an emotionally favourable climate, the children were creative, persistent, their self confidence and pride developing well.

The children did not express the need for an everyday transition. We have concluded that occasional togetherness on the playground, on various other occasions, in the dressing room, etc., and a weekly offer in the form of various workshops and play nooks in other rooms is sufficient for the child to satisfy his need for companionship with other children in the kindergarten during different activities, and his desire to go to another group at some other time is upheld. Play days were organized in such a manner that a child could join the activity whenever he wished. If this happened on a daily basis, the kindergarten teacher could not become well acquainted with all the children, which is a prerogative for successful educational work. On the other hand children sometimes do need opportunities for activities which require peace and quiet so that a child can experience their essence, for ex. the world of music. In such a case transition would mean a disturbance.

We have also established that children show no interest in joining other children if the activities have not been well organized. Child's wishes and needs are very different, therefore a change in company is not reason enough for joining another group.

Contents, activities and resources play a more important role and they were the primary reason for the child to leave his group. The activity had to be more interesting than the activity that was going on in his home group. Otherwise the child would not leave his group.

During the time of the study, some essential requirements or tasks for the kindergarten teacher implementing such organization of kindergarten work have become apparent: the necessity of team work, counseling among the kindergarten teachers, good knowledge of the children of all age groups, varied choice of resources and tools, attractive place arrangement. These are the elements of a good preparation for educational work which will offer the children an appropriate and challenging environment for acquiring experience, social skills, independent and responsible behaviour. A child will go home richer, better developed and with numerous impressions he will enjoy sharing with his family, because it has not been just an ordinary kindergarten day he is returning home from.

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